

Sion Hill Estate, Factory
Queen's Quarter
St. Croix
Virgin Islands

HABS No. VI-64 B

HABS
VI,
1-QUEEN
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SION HILL ESTATE, FACTORY

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Location: Queen's Quarter, St. Croix, Virgin Islands

GENERAL STATEMENT

Architectural Interest: The stabilized ruins at Sion Hill are an excellent example of the setting and careful relationships of the buildings within a sugar factory complex. The factory varies from the usual "T" plan, and includes a distillery. Of note are the vaulted chambers which support the north cisterns, the arcades along the central section, and the large, well-detailed storage building at the south end.

Condition of Fabric: The majority of the areas within the factory are roofless and the walls in general are short of their original plate line. But all major walls, arches and vaults are stabilized. A clear idea of the areas and what kind of roofs were had can be determined except along the side, where the distillery and small cisterns are badly worn away. The north end cisterns have been covered with concrete and are in use.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Orientation: The factory will be divided into five sub-areas for clarity in description (see sketch plan). (A) to the north consists of cisterns over a barrel-vaulted storage room. These vaults are on the lower of the two main levels of the building. The cisterns have a flat concrete roof reached by steps. To the south, (B) consists of one large room on the upper level. Both (A) and (B) have an east-west axis. (C) is the boiling house and consists of an arcaded firing trench to the west, and an arcaded boiling room with the boiling bench for "coppers"

to the east. The boiling trench is at a lower level. This section of the factory runs N and S. (D) is another storage room two stories high. The 2nd floor is on the same level as the boiling room and with an E - W axis. One gable remains as do tiles from the roof. (E) consists of the large chimney connected to the firing pits; the ruins and chimney of the distillery and the remains of two small cisterns. To the W of section A is the mill resting on its grass platform whose retaining wall abutts the north end of the factory. To the W of section D is a terrace followed by a walk and the present house of the Estate.

To the S are the other main buildings of the complex.

Foundation and Wall Construction:

All walls are of limestone marble blocks. Openings are formed by arches, flat and segmental, with some windows retaining wood frames. The vaults in section (A) are of the same marble, with the four entrance barrel vaults meet by two cross barrel vaults. Between each vault on the N facade are massive piers. The arcades and archways are round or extended curves. 3 arches are found in the S wall of (B) and in section (C) two arcades. The remainder of the openings are segmental arches on the interior and flat on the exterior. Bands encircle the various sections immediately above the keystones of the windows and at the plate line. The chimneys are square in plan, tapering upward with a cornice band near the top of the larger. The W gable end of section (D) show on the interior the slots of timber bracing for the roof. Square urns are at each corner and atop the gable of (D).

Openings: Windows and Doors.

The room within the vaulted chambers is closed off by iron and wood barred windows and door. Some of the 2nd story windows of (D) retain not only their wood frames, set into a groove in the masonry, but also have some horizontal wood bars, segments of frames appear in almost every window and door in (D).

Arcades:

The two arcades of section (C) are formed of single arches with no capital bands or bases. The continued motif of keystone with attached band directly above is the only trim. The east arcade of 5 arches on the upper level formed the outer wall for the roof over the line of boiling pots against the central wall which separates the upper from the lower level.

This middle wall has the open remains of 5 openings overlooking the lower 4 openings of the W arcade whose shed roof protected the five pits.

Vaults:

The N facade shows four deep rounded openings recessed behind 5 large piers with heavy cornice and bands, and bases. The openings have keystones and band arrangements as found elsewhere. The 4 vaults extend back some 15' before meeting the first of 2 secondary cross vaults.

Roof:

All areas except (A) are without covering; (A) having a recent concrete slab over its cisterns. The other areas show evidence of a terra cotta wing tile pitched roof on wood rafters laid above (D); and shed roofs probably over both sides of (C) but definitely over the W side. No eaves, cornices or dormers exist.

Chimneys:

Of the 2 chimneys the one connected to the fireboxes of the boiling bench is by far the largest, rising 50' - 60'.

It is square and tapered with a moulded cornice some 3' - 4' from the top - one iron band encircles the 4 sides 12' from the ground. The smaller chimney is 15'-20' high and was part of the distillery. It has a simple band and beveled top edge. Each chimney is connected to its particular fire pits although the decay of the ruins in this part makes a clear understanding difficult.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan and use of various parts (See Sketch)

In general the processing of the crushed sugar cane through the Factory was as follows:

The crushed cane juice flowed down hill from the mill to the boiling bench in area (C), where it was boiled down to sugar.

Once boiled down the sugar dried on the upper floor of (D); with the finished product most likely kept on the 1st floor.

The cisterns in area (A) are not a typical feature of the Factory layout, and supplied an abundant quantity of water for both the sugar and rum production. From the molasses remaining after the sugar processing, rum was distilled in area (e) with the smaller chimney connected to the still. Area (B) may have served as a storage area for the rum production.

The firing trenches under the bench were all connected to the common large chimney. The large wall openings on the upper level ensured ventilation from the heat of the boiling pots.

Stairways:

The only steps are the 9 steps leading to the top of the cisterns.

Floor:

Most areas at this time have no other floor than packed earth. A rough stone paving has been laid dry in and around the E arcade of section (C).

Wall and Ceiling Finish:

Originally stuccoed and limewashed, the walls are now almost entirely bare blocks, repointed during stabilization. Within the vault entrance remains of stucco and red wash are found. The only remaining ceiling would be the vaults of section (A) which are treated as are the walls.

Doors:

Conditions are the same as exterior doors except for the iron grill gates within the vaults of (A) which are of recent date.

Hardware:

The only fittings left to the windows and doors are scattered pindels and bar brackets in section (D). One iron band encircles the larger chimney. The 3 remaining boiling pots ^{are} ~~are~~ shallow ~~and of copper~~, the largest being 6' across and less than 2' deep.

Firing Pits:

On the lower level set into the masonry below the boiling bench are half a dozen furnace openings. The large chimney is connected directly to the last one to the N, the other pits being also connected inline. The firebox of the distillery is in ruins.

OTHER:

Retaining Walls:

The entire complex is contained by two encircling retaining walls. The one to the W is within 12'-20' of the W side of the Factory. The platform of the mill is contained by a curving retaining wall which butts into the factory at the NE corner of section (A). A stairway leads down the side of this retaining wall to the lower level.

Outbuildings:

The site has remains of many of the smaller buildings that completed the sugar estate. The Stable, Privy and Kitchen are briefly covered under separate reports.

General Setting:

The hilltop site is well looked after, with many tropical plants, and the view is uninterrupted for many miles in all directions.

SEE SION HILL: ESTATE HOUSE AND MILL FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

J. Michael Penett

